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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

Iran's Reemergence as a Major Player in Global Security

**SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES**

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Executive Summary

Title: Through the Lens of Operational Design

Author: Major Jonathon M. Britton, United States Army

Thesis: If the United States pursues military action against the Islamic Republic of Iran then decision-makers and military planners must recognize the constraints that Iran's unique nature and character place on military operations and conduct limited military operations with limited political objectives in order to set the conditions for success.

Discussion: The Iranian threat to global security is continuing to grow. Iran continues to develop and enhance the conventional and unconventional aspects of its military power and conduct bilateral diplomacy with nations to build alliances against the United States and its NATO allies. Additionally, Iran threatens to disrupt global trade and economics not only in the Strait of Hormuz but also throughout the Gulf region. Iran has denounced Israel and has recently threatened its existence on the international stage; likewise, *Pasdaran* (Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution) activities are increasing throughout Southwest Asia, as well as into Africa and South America.

Iran is a perceived threat to the US and its interests as it demonstrated its willingness to accept risk and extend its policies through direct action with terrorist attacks in United States, as seen in the foiled assassination plot of the Saudi Ambassador to the United States. Meanwhile, Iran's nuclear capability has continued to grow despite the international economic sanctions levied against the Islamic Republic. Iran continues to deny International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors' access to possible uranium enrichment facilities, suggesting the development of a nuclear weapons capability. American and Israeli intelligence analysts estimate Iran could have nuclear weapons by the end of 2013.

It is vital for the US decision-makers, civilian and military, to understand Iran's unique, diverse history and systems, as well as Iran's military capabilities before undertaking military operations to achieve US political and military objectives. This understanding, coupled with lessons learned from more than a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, will enable effective, comprehensive planning before the military instrument of national power is engaged.

Conclusion: The United States must consider Iran's unique and diverse culture through an understanding of its history and military capabilities. In order to set the conditions necessary for success should decisive military action be required, the United States must target Iran's critical vulnerabilities simultaneously through multiple instruments of national power and draw on the United States' recent experience in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Preface

As an Infantry Officer, I am always looking for the next fight. Although my influence on the fight against the enemy in the Global War on Terror has thus far been limited to the tactical level, my education here at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College has enabled me to gain a broader perspective on war and the conduct of warfare in general. At the company level, my focus was always on the kill or capture of current targets within targeting cycles that I would refine and execute as my primary responsibility. Having had the opportunity to step out of combat operations and learn about the operational level of war, and how it ties to our national strategy, has been a gift I will continue to utilize throughout the rest of my career. As I look for my next fight through an operational lens, I can clearly see a fight with Iran on the horizon based on its strategic goals not aligning with the United States' goals. I have had a particular interest in Iran ever since a significant amount of my time and sweat, and some blood of my brothers' has been dedicated to combating Shi'a extremists that had ties back to Iran, while operating in and around some Baghdad garden spots like Sadr City, Shaab, Hussaniyah, and Sab al Bour, between 2006 and 2010. Should the US and Iran fail on the diplomatic front on current issues, I believe that our military may have to extend our nation's policies by other means in true Clausewitzian fashion to ensure peace and rationality, to provide a safe and prosperous environment for the children of the future.

My motivation throughout this writing process is attributed to the memory of Sergeant David A. Croft, whose life was taken at the hands of Iranian special groups within weeks of him returning home from Baghdad Province in 2010. I would like to thank LtCol John Dobes, Dr. Paul Gelpi, Dr. Benjamin Jensen, and my Conference Group (CG 2) "the Deuce" for their year-long efforts in the instruction of all aspects of professional military education. I would also like

to thank the Leadership Communication Skills Center for all of the advice and assistance they provided me as I developed my writing skills. I would also like to thank the remainder of the faculty at the CSC for the knowledge they have given me, which I have stored in my “kit bag” for use in the future. I would particularly like to thank LtGen (Ret) Paul K. Van Riper for his instruction in my elective class “Future War and Innovation” from which I gained the most insight for the production of this paper. Last and most importantly, I must thank my family for the enormous amount of support they have given me, specifically my beautiful wife Janet, and our girls Aubree and Ellie.

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Introduction: Iran and U.S. National Security

With the US war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan ending, and as the nation enters into a period of fiscal uncertainty, military commanders and planners at all levels must look toward potential future conflicts in order to position best the United States for success. As Carl von Clausewitz observed, “war is merely the continuation of policy by other means;”¹ thus, it is necessary for the US military to remain prepared to extend the US Government’s policies by military means.

In *Another Bloody Century*, noted strategist and futurist, Colin S. Gray concludes that, “a US-Iranian conflict is yet another plausible example of interstate conflict, potentially on a major scale.”² The Islamic Republic of Iran’s threat to the United States and her allies, as well as global security, suggests that it is a worthwhile endeavor for the military professional to consider possible conflict with Iran. Unlike recent adversaries the US military has faced, Iran has significant conventional military force, as well as potent irregular forces. Thus, Iran presents a complex challenge that tests the full range of US military capabilities.

Iran is a potential threat to US interests. Iran’s geography and foreign policy has facilitated its interference in coalition operations in Iraq and NATO operations in Afghanistan. An anti-Israeli foreign policy and ties to Hezbollah has meant that Iran has long threatened Israeli security. The Iranian threat to regional and global security is evident, as well, in its actions in Syria. Moreover, Iranian engagement with nations whose policy toward the United States range from antipathy to hostility, such as the People’s Republic of China, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Venezuela, and Cuba, has been problematic to the advancement of US interests. When added to the episodic interference with shipping through the Strait of Hormuz and nuclear weapon ambitions, these issues mean that for the United States, Iran is a

“flashpoint in the Middle East”³ with which US and allied decision-makers will have to contend for the foreseeable future.

Concerning future conflict and military operations, it is imperative that decision-makers and planners remember that operations in Iraq and Afghanistan were unique unto themselves. Nevertheless, there is a common lesson that may be learned from both theaters of operations: initial military success resulted in a mission creep that the United States must avoid in any potential conflict with Iran. Iran is very different from Iraq and Afghanistan. In order to frame the problem effectively, it is important to understand Persian history and Iranian military capabilities, as well as the nation’s structure. This paper will show that if the United States takes military action against Iran, then decision makers and military planners must recognize the constraints that Iran’s unique character and circumstances place on military options and pursue limited military operations in order to set the conditions for success.

Framing the Environment: The Evolution of Iranian Society

In order to understand the Iranian worldview, it is important to understand Iran’s Persian identity, religious heritage, its path to modernization, and its experiences in past conflicts prior to the Islamic Revolution. Regarding its Persian geographical identity, Iran “has occupied the same area for more than 2,500 years...Iran’s imperial legacy remains important to Iran’s contemporary narrative. There is a strong sense among Iranians that Iran is a great civilization that deserves to be treated as a great power.”⁴ Indeed, contemporary demands for international respect and declarations of national pride that infuse diplomatic efforts and policies broadcast through social media reflect this heritage and collective identity. Iran’s national identity dates back to 559 BCE and Cyrus the Great, beginning with the Achaemenid Empire.

The fall of the Sassanid Empire created a vacuum that led to the Arab invasion in the seventh century which brought Islam with it. Despite Islam's Arab origins, a Persian identity continued after the Arab invasion and some traditions like the Iranian New Year are still celebrated today.⁵ New dynasties rose and fell, particularly the Ilkhanid dynasty, which resulted from the Mongol invasion; nevertheless, Iranian unity persevered.

Iranian pride stems from their long history of overcoming adversities that other regional nations do not share. "While Arab states often speak of unity but seldom achieve it, Iranian states coalesce into a greater unit, even after periods of fracture."⁶ The Iranian religious identity is very strong, and has survived for many centuries thanks to a deep public adherence to Shi'i Islam. Eighty-five percent of the Iranian population practices Shi'a Islam, specifically Twelver Shi'ism, which is a result of the Safavid Dynasty where Ismail proclaimed it to be the official religion of Iran. Twelver Shi'ism differs from the Sunni Muslim caliphate due to Twelvers believing in the Twelve Imams, and believing in Muhammad's cousin and brother in law, Ali, to be the father of Muhammad's only bloodline and rightful leader of the Muslim religion.

Iran's path to modernization brought outside influence, and the negative effects led to a violent struggle that shapes the nation today. The expansion of trade that Shah Sulayman was responsible for in the seventeenth century caused yet another fracture in the ruling body causing Iran to fall back on its Islamic leadership. Real decline started during the rule of Sulayman and immediately after as the shahs were subject to negative outside influences. Sulayman's rule as Shah is a good example. "He spent so much time in the harem, women, and eunuchs could influence his policy much more than even some ministers."⁷ Other forms of corruption persisted, and Sulayman's son was also negatively influenced, but both times, the clergy provided a backstop for the nation to fall back on. "Shah Sultan Husayn (1694-1722) was a

weak ruler. Factionalism increased in his time, as did religious intolerance...but Shi'i clergy gained greater influence over the weak shah.”⁸ Through time, it is important to understand that the ruling dynasties relied on traditional Iranian systems to rule the nation. Their bureaucratic practices were relied on as new dynasties developed governing procedures. “No empire could survive without an able bureaucracy. And so, Regardless of whether invaders such as the Arab caliphs in the nascent Islamic Empire liked it, they needed Iranian bureaucrats who based their actions not on the Qur'an, but rather on pre-Islamic models.”⁹ Iran's modernization came at the risk of opening themselves up to outside influence as the shah wished to improve services for the people and as Western interest in resources increased. The ensuing tobacco laws, sugar taxes, and the shah's violent response to instances were what sparked the Constitutional Revolution. Iran's Constitutional Revolution intensified when Muzaffar al-Din Shah's “prime minister ordered the exile of the two leading mullahs from Tehran. After the shah ordered his troops to surround with artillery a mosque in which religious clergy, students, and merchants had taken refuge, protestors began to stream into the grounds of the British Embassy...The shah could not ignore such a large protest...”¹⁰

The impact of the great wars of the twentieth century demonstrates how weak Iran became after the outside influence of the Industrial Revolution caused decline. As World War I Germany was growing, the “Russian and British politicians negotiated the Anglo-Russian Convention in secret...Finally, on August 31, 1907, they signed their agreement...London and St. Petersburg divided Iran into three zones: a northern sphere of Russian influence, a central neutral zone, and a southern sphere of British influence.”¹¹

A glimmer of hope for Iran's return to greatness and restoration of pride came when Reza Shah took power after exiling Muhammad Shah on April 25, 1926 and the Pahlavi dynasty

began, leaving its mark on the most recent form of government prior to the Islamic Revolution. Reza Shah focused on modernization and improvements within Iran, but also took power from the clergy. The clerics lost power because the shah controlled the money, the army, and essentially the legitimate power. This allowed Reza Shah to continue modernization, which facilitated Western influence, a step back in the wrong direction.

World War II resulted in occupation of the British and Russians because the Allies “feared that Iran might allow Germany to open a second front against the Soviet Union’s soft underbelly...simultaneously, the Allies hoped to establish a supply route across Iran to ship war materials to Russia.”¹² The shah would not agree to expel all Germans from Iran’s borders and forced the Brits and Russians to occupy and force the shah from the throne in 1941. America’s influence came in the form of a CIA-led overthrow of Mossadeq by rallying the population, which reinstated the Shah. This British plan replaced Mosaddeq with General Fazlullah Zahedi, a right leaning monarchist who had previously sympathized with Germany during World War II. The British relied on the CIA to execute the plan as Iran had cut ties with the British government, causing them to lose access.¹³ General Zahedi facilitated the shah’s return.

Once Zahedi was in charge, the shah returned and ruled in a more dictatorial fashion than before the coup. This resulted the Iranian people becoming ever more anti-American as they blamed the Shah’s excesses on the US, which the people also took as an insult to their pride. The sentiment left after the actions taken here still linger in Iran today.

Even as the Iranian military expanded, the people felt insulted because they understood how the improvements were actually perpetuated by the West. “Iran also became a significant regional power, with a large and modern military. Paradoxically, the shah’s success at enriching and empowering Iran offended many Iranians’ nationalist pride since it depended not only upon

Iran's own power, but also upon assistance and close association with the West, and the United States.”¹⁴ With the oil market and Iranian exports increasing over the decades following World War II, Iranians realized that their oilfields were at risk of losing pressure. They pursued nuclear energy in order to supplement their energy needs, which relied on outside labor and services. Combined with the growing industry during that period, Iran relied on foreign nationals seeking work inside its borders. In total, there were “60,000 foreign workers, whose very presence insulted the proud Iranian nationalists.”¹⁵ While the shah profited from oil production, hotels, banks, and factories that came with modernization, he became more isolated from the people, because “the social impact of modernization was making the population chafe at authoritarianism.”¹⁶ This would be a key factor in what led to the Islamic Revolution.

The Islamic Revolution reversed the path Iran was on during the Pahlavi Dynasty and changed Iran to its present position. “When President Jimmy Carter visited Tehran in January 1978, he toasted Iran as an ‘island of stability’ and close friend of the United States. Within two years, millions of Iranians chanted ‘Death to America’ as they paraded before its embassy where Khomeini supporters held American diplomats hostage for 444 days.”¹⁷ As Khomeini supported the masses, it is important to note, “While it might seem contradictory for nationalistic pride to be based upon Islamic rather than imperial Iranian identity, the Safavid imposition of Shi’ism almost 500 years before gave Iran a uniquely bipolar nationalism, based on its ancient imperial traditions and also on its separate form of Islam.”¹⁸ It is clear that religion played a significant part in Iranian history.

Popular support for the Islamic Revolution was fueled by the insult felt by Iranian people due to their dislike of foreign influence.¹⁹ Khomeini brought into practice *velayat-e faqih*, or an Islamic government, which translates to “rule by the jurisprudent” and is the basis of his book

(1970.) This Islamic government was based on “a system in which government institutions had revolutionist backdrop system where all the power was actually held. This system is what defines the system as it is today in Iran is now recognized as the Islamic Republic.”²⁰

The system also has a checks and balances system that ensure the government maintains its roots with Islam. “There is a popularly elected parliament (Majlis), but all legislation has to be approved by a Guardian Council made up of six clerics who together ruled on the constitutionality of Majlis actions; indeed, the six clerics on the Guardian Council could veto Majlis actions for incompatibility with Islam.”²¹ This power of The Supreme Leader is based on Islam, which can be seen in the government today. The Supreme Leader maintains all power to veto any decisions or actions taken by the governing body.²² (See Figure 2.) As this significant transformation was taking place, Saddam Hussein grew uneasy in regard to the revolution happening on his doorstep, particularly when the Iranian government identified the need to overthrow the Iraqi government.²³

The Iran-Iraq War is another, more recent example that illustrates how Iranian nationalism and isolation remain prominent factors. The war started to take shape as Iranian terrorists conducted attacks in Baghdad, which resulted in escalation. “Tehran provided support for Iraqi Shi’ite terrorists attacking Baghdad government officials...Iraq responded by expelling 100,000 Shi’ites said to be of Iranian origin. Clashes began along the border, which by August 1980, had escalated into tank and artillery duels and air strikes.”²⁴ Skirmishes continued, and the war officially started on September 7, 1980. The actual Iraqi invasion came approximately two weeks later, where Iraq had clearly miscalculated its approach. “On September 22, Iraqi troops began their all-out invasion of Iran, a country with more than three-times Iraq’s population. The Iraqi attack was remarkably inept. The most obvious problem was poor strategic vision.”²⁵

Saddam thought his army would be victorious, but instead they fell short of achieving even minor objectives, let alone the possible overthrow of Khomeini's government. It was clear that even a regional neighbor like Iraq did not understand the strength of the Iranian culture.

"Saddam underestimated Iranian nationalism. The Iranian people would rally behind whatever government was defending the national territory against the long-despised Arabs."²⁶ Iran's mining of the Straits of Hormuz during the war further isolated them as it interfered with countries neutral to their ongoing war. Iran intensified hostilities by increasing attacks on international oil shipping in the Gulf.²⁷ A Kuwaiti tanker struck a mine, as well as the USS *Samuel B. Roberts* in 1988. The war ended shortly after when the US Navy mistook an Iranian passenger plane for a fighter plane, shooting it down and killing all 290 people on board. This led Iranian leadership to believe that the United States was joining the war in support of Iraq.²⁸ Less than a year after the war ended, Khomeini died, ushering in the Second Islamic Republic.

The Second Islamic Republic was based on the first with regard to an Islamic basis of government, but the Supreme Leader exerts cultural restrictions over the people and maintains all political power. The internal struggle within Iran today is that real power remains "in the hands of the revolutionary elite, rather than elected officials."²⁹ The hope with some Iranians today is that "'moderates' would triumph over 'radicals' and abandon Iran's revolutionary baggage."³⁰ In fact, the 1997 presidential election shows how that sentiment grew in Iran in a short amount of time. When a traditionalist candidate ran against Khatami, a reformer, "Khatami reached out to the disaffected youth and had campaigned for president across the country...a storm of excitement swept the country, and 29 million people turned out to vote compared to 16 million four years earlier."³¹ With the ability to gain that much traction in a short amount of time, Khatami succeeded in winning by a large margin. Not only did he win, his "20 million votes

were a crushing victory.”³² However impressive the victory was, it meant little to for the future of Iran as the Supreme Leader, Khamenei, maintained the real power. “Khamenei remained the unelected supreme leader wielding unlimited veto power and ultimate control over Iran’s security apparatus.”³³ The same base of power belongs to the Supreme Leader today.

Although the United States prefers the spread of democracy, the ability to grasp a democratic system and its structure would be nearly impossible for Iran without a long and drawn out regime change that would have an immeasurable amount of variables. However, the tension between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei remains high, and the Iranian people may continue to move toward reform. Analysis provided by STRATFOR’s “Second Quarter Forecast 2013,” says that both sides are pushing for control so hard that “a compromise of sorts will likely defuse the current situation but will not represent the end of a struggle that at its core has the potential to redefine the political system in which clerics have held sway for more than three decades.”³⁴ That forecast asserts that the base of power could be shifting away from the clergy and toward the moderate politicians.

Katajun Amirpur is an Iranian-German journalist and Assistant Professor of the Modern Islamic World at the University of Zürich. Comparing Iran to Egypt, she states “In fact, a great deal of thinking and writing on democracy has taken place in the Islamic world in recent decades. This is particularly so in Iran, where the attitudes towards democracy have undergone a substantial change over the years.”³⁵ This change in the thinking of the Iranian population, and the thinking of even their President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, can explain how the chasm between he and Khamenei is continuing to grow. Although the revolution seemed to degrade Western influence in Iran, Amirpur asserts that the intellectual movement in Iran, which she refers to as post-Islamism, needs a theoretical framework. “In a state where democracy and

human rights are – in accordance with Khomeini's dictum – regarded as un-Islamic, opponents of this view had to provide a reason for why democracy and human rights are indeed Islamic, or at least are not in contradiction with Islam.”³⁶ In the sense that it is a goal of democracy and Islam to provide rights to people in general, perhaps US diplomats have common ground where Iranian diplomats can meet.

Arguably, the most critical point to interject diplomatically with Iran would be at the point of nuclear weapons proliferation. Patrick Clawson, the director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, stated that diplomacy would be the preferred solution to ending the standoff between the US and Iran regarding its nuclear program, and that there is no shared urgency from the international community. He says the US and its allies need to gather “the collective willpower necessary to resolve this problem diplomatically, the United States and its allies need to systematically assess the risks, challenges and potential consequences of the principal alternative policy options for dealing with Iran: preventive action and deterrence.”³⁷ It appears that if the international community and Iran cannot leverage a diplomatic process in the near future to end the standoff, or to facilitate realistic monitoring of Iran’s nuclear program, diplomacy may need to escalate to use of military force. This means that the US, Israel, and others could soon increase operations against Iran in covert/clandestine fashions. Reform is slowly spreading through Iran’s population, and hopefully to their parliament and the rest of government. The question is whether it will spread fast enough to avert further escalation to prevent military action.

It is difficult to tell if Iran will be able to continue steps toward negotiation and cooperation with the United States. George Friedman reported in STRATFOR’s “Iran: Ayatollah Warns President,” that in 2011 that Senior Iranian cleric Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami

issued a warning to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad saying he “should know that the majority vote for him was not absolute but conditional on his obedience toward the orders by the supreme leadership.”³⁸ Ultimately, Ahmadinejad answers to a higher power, the Supreme Leader, and “the top of the system is the constitution, which has clarified the power structure.”³⁹ For the near future, the president will be required to enact the strategic policy handed to him from the Supreme Leader. Friedman goes on to explain that “the cleric, an ally of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is deputy head of the Assembly of Experts, the clerical body with powers to appoint, hold accountable, and remove the supreme leader.” At this point, it does not appear that anyone threatens the Supreme Leader’s presence as long as his ally holds this position.

Framing the Problem: The Threat Iran Poses to Global Security

Ahmadinejad has been seen stifling the Supreme Leader Khamenei, taking risks that have so far only resulted in warnings which may add up to him being able to create enough space to facilitate more Western outreach. One specific risk Ahmadinejad took, according to STRATFOR’s “Iran: Ayatollah Warns President” article written by George Friedman, involved the Minister of Intelligence and National Security, Heidar Moslehi. Ahmadinejad forced Moslehi to resign, fully knowing that it would upset Khamenei after he dismissed then Vice President Esfandiar Masheh, a close ally of Ahmadinejad. Afterward, Khamenei ordered that Moslehi be reinstated, all Ahmadinejad could do in retaliation to being overruled was threaten resignation and take one week off of going to Cabinet meetings.⁴⁰ Ahmadinejad obviously did not resign, but it was a move that he arguably knew would test Khamenei, and understanding Khamenei’s direction of the IRGC, at least partly through Moslehi, was likely what tempted him

to do so. (See Figure 1.) The report goes on to say, “such a move would merely be an attempt to force the supreme leader's hand in an increasingly high-pressure game of brinksmanship.”⁴¹ This move was too much for Khamenei. Afterward, Friedman reported, “The supreme leader now fears the president could become a threat unless he is reined in -- particularly now, with a weakened clergy and a rising military and new class of politicians, led by Ahmadinejad. The debate over the issue underscores the extent to which Ahmadinejad has accumulated power.”⁴² Khamenei said later in a speech, broadcast on television on 24 April 2011, that “I won't allow, as long as I'm alive, an iota of deviation of this massive movement of the nation,”⁴³ This conflict alone exemplifies the type of friction that exists between Iran's leaders.

Although Ahmadinejad will be replaced in 2013, the same struggle is likely to continue as it has for years. Friedman reports that in the end, Ahmadinejad, or his successor will (or should) eventually end up winning if events continue to play out in the same manner and they must negotiate a settlement due to the overall weakness of the government system.⁴⁴ It is important to understand that this process will likely take a long time, and effects of a transition of this magnitude will take years to surface as former leadership transitions out of the political arena. If a compromise were to happen between the two, the longer it takes to happen, the more powerful Ahmadinejad will become due to popular support from reform-minded Iranians. “Ultimately, this conflict between the religious and political centers of power is about the reshaping of the Iranian political system, specifically the hybrid between its clerical and republican parts and with the military benefiting from the struggle.”⁴⁵ Should the military benefit from this struggle and continue to exist as the Islamic Republic continues to move deeper into the twenty first century, Iran's military capabilities require analysis prior to potential US

military intervention in Iran. Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is the central hub of the Iranian Army, and the executor of special operations directed by the Supreme Leader.

Iran's interference with Israel is one specific factor that is interfering with diplomacy. General Mohammad Ali Jafari, head of Iran's IRGC said to the ISNA and Fars news agencies in December 2012 that an Israeli war on Iran "will eventually happen...but the Jewish state will be destroyed as a result...war will happen but it is not certain where and when."⁴⁶ Al Arabiya states, "The comments were the first time Iran has acknowledged the probability of open armed conflict with Israel. Previously, it had dismissed such a scenario as bluff on the part of Israel's leaders."⁴⁷ The contention between the two countries is no secret, and the capabilities of the IRGC are no secret either. President Obama has had a keen eye on Iranian clandestine support to Israeli opposition for years, and said in 2009, "leaders in Tehran are supplying the means of attacks, or financing, for terrorist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah."⁴⁸ The fact that Iran is supporting attacks against the United States' allies shows that it is already taking steps beyond diplomacy and is progressively taking steps toward direct action. Israel is maintaining a watchful eye and conducting its own operations within the Islamic Republic. Al Arabiya reports, "Israel believes Iran's nuclear program to be aimed at developing an atomic weapons capability that would menace its own existence, and its current status as the Middle East's sole, if undeclared, nuclear weapons power."⁴⁹

The capabilities of the IRGC Qods force do not simply end with Hamas and Hezbollah; their reach expands much further and it has been going on for years. Mehdi Khalaji, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, wrote about the struggles the Iranian prime minister had in regard to use of the Qods force. Mir Hossein Mousavi resigned in 1988 in protest against Khamenei because of his interference in his duties. Mousavi complained that

operations outside the country were taking place without the government's knowledge or orders and "only after an airplane is hijacked are we made aware of it. Only after a machine gun opens fire in one of Lebanon's streets and its noise echoes everywhere do we find out. Only after [Saudi police] find explosive material in Iranian pilgrims' baggage am I informed."⁵⁰

IRGC Qods force actions necessitate orders from Iran's Supreme Leader, Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Hosseini Khamenei. The difficulties of leading the Islamic Republic politically with a religious supreme leader are apparent, however, the IRGC activity in Israel only poses one threat to a much larger issue. Michael Rubin, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, and a senior lecturer at the Naval Postgraduate School, expanded on Qods force/Hezbollah actions extending into Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina. Here, multiple attacks linked to Iran took place, including the bombing of the Israeli embassy in 1992 and a Jewish community center in 1994 in Buenos Aires. Rubin states, "In 2006, Argentine prosecutors issued warrants for former Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and seven others on charges of ordering and masterminding the 1994 attack. The Hezbollah presence in the region has remained a source of concern for policymakers to the present."⁵¹

This is just one way Iran is extending its influence around the world and creating what Ahmadinejad calls an "axis of unity" against the United States. For example, Matthew Levitt wrote in the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) review in 2012 that "Over the past decade, Iran has vastly expanded its presence in South and Central America, opening new missions and populating them with far more people than required for normal diplomatic duties."⁵² He also quoted GEN Fraser, commander of US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), as saying in his 2011 posture statement to Congress "while much of Iran's engagement in the region has been with Venezuela and Bolivia, it has nearly doubled the number of embassies in

the region in the past decade and hosted three regional heads of state in 2010.” This synergistic use of diplomatic and clandestine approaches in the region benefits Iran by allowing it to take advantage of the conditions set in the poor countries by the IRGC while using its liberal approach above ground to look like heroes to the countries’ governments. As Iran continues the same types of operations in the African countries of Senegal and Zimbabwe in particular, it is providing what many perceive as a cover for expanding its nuclear ambitions.

In his statement to House Permanent Select Committee on intelligence in 2011, James Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence discussed Iran’s potential reach across the globe, as well as its enhancing nuclear threat in detail. First, in regard to Mansour Arbabsiar’s 2011 assassination plot against the Saudi Ambassador to the United States, Adel al-Jubier, “shows that some Iranian officials—probably including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—have changed their calculus and are now more willing to conduct an attack in the United States in response to real or perceived US actions that threaten the regime.”⁵³ This plan, where Arbabsiar (an Iranian-American living in Texas) had admittedly in court corresponded with drug cartels and the Iranian military, is just one example of how Iran is willing to accept more risk as they continue to defy the United States’ efforts.

In regard to Iran’s nuclear ambitions, Mr. Clapper added “we assess Iran is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons, in part by developing various nuclear capabilities that better position it to produce such weapons, should it choose to do so.”⁵⁴ In the report, he continuously alluded to the classification level on the subject, and that closed-door conversations would need to continue. He did state, “We do not know, however, if Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons.”⁵⁵ Mr. Clapper went on to say that “Iran’s technical advancement, particularly in uranium enrichment, strengthens our assessment that Iran has the scientific,

technical, and industrial capacity to eventually produce nuclear weapons, making the central issue its political will to do so.”⁵⁶ During the briefing, he made clear that Iran is technically capable of producing enough highly enriched uranium for a weapon, based on the advances he identified. Whether or not Iran decides to produce nuclear weapons is a priority intelligence requirement for multiple countries, and the US and its allies are taking steps toward ensuring Iran does not cross the threshold into the nuclear arena.

On a positive note, the *2012's Global Forecasting Report Card*, produced by STRATFOR Global Intelligence, states that, “There will be no U.S./Israeli war with Iran in 2012. Iran will continue trying to expand its sphere of influence in the region, but it will be operating under heavy constraints.”⁵⁷ They go on to predict that countries in proximity to the Islamic Republic will ally together, that the US will not successfully negotiate, and there will essentially be a continued stalemate. This past year, President Barack Obama publicly announced the toughest sanctions on Iran that the US has ever imposed. STRATFOR goes on to say, “We maintain that a U.S./Israeli military confrontation with Iran is unlikely this year. Iran's influence in much of the region is largely that of a spoiler as Iran tries to prevent a stable transition in Syria and maintain leverage through chaos in the Levant.”⁵⁸ Because of this, Friedman assess the sanctions weighing on Iran will cause them to weaken. The level and types of operations that are being conducted on the soil of multiple participants such as assassination attempts, cyber attacks, and support to insurgency and terrorism, economic sanctions, extensions of operational reach, etc, are astounding. It is safe to assess that the United States and its allies are walking a fine line that has the potential to escalate quickly to unified action against the Islamic Republic.

Possible conflict with Iran exists for multiple reasons, and should a conflict begin, it is critical for Iran's opponents to understand its military capabilities. In terms of ground forces, Iran has approximately 545,000 troops in its defense force.⁵⁹ Richard L. Russell, Professor of National Security Affairs in the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University (NDU) and Adjunct Professor of Security Studies in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University, wrote a report on a possible war with Iran in 2009 in which he stated that although 545,000 is a high number in quantity, that "Tehran's forces had more combat experience in mobile conventional warfare than their Gulf Arab rivals, but that experience is rapidly aging. The Iranians who fought on the frontlines during the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1988 are retired."⁶⁰ He goes on to say that, "Iran now has a largely conscripted force with limited military training and little combat experience."⁶¹ Without much combat experience, it will be difficult for Iran to produce the leadership necessary to overcome a US adversary that has been conducting combat operations for over ten years. Iran will be particularly challenged by its old equipment.

Where leadership and capability in general are lacking, technology could be used to bridge a gap. In Iran's case the technology is not present. "The bulk of Iran's inventories are American-built weapons bought before the 1979 revolution and a mix of Soviet and Chinese weapons that are qualitatively inferior to the modern American and Western weapons systems."⁶² Iran's aircraft are aging as well, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies reported in 2005, "Some of the most technologically sophisticated aircraft in Iran's inventory are about 24 Iraqi Mirage F-1 combat aircraft."⁶³ While Iran faces challenges in maintaining its own aircraft, its Gulf neighbors, or potential US allies, could gain an upper hand quickly. "Iran's combat aircraft, moreover, are aging, and it would be difficult for the Iranians to

keep them operational for a prolonged air campaign against Arab neighbors. On the other hand, the Arab Gulf states with F-15, F-16, and Tornado combat aircraft have more capabilities to strike against Iranian targets than Iran has to strike the Arab Gulf.”⁶⁴ This fact, combined with the air power the US can project into the region, puts Iran at another disadvantage, a fact that Iran is likely to be aware of having kept a close eye on US operations in the Arab Peninsula.

Through observation of the United States’ participation in operations throughout the Middle East, and particularly the Iraq and Afghan conflicts, Iran’s tactics could be adapting. “During the Iran-Iraq war in April 1988, for example, while the U.S. Navy was escorting merchant and tanker ships in the Gulf to protect them from Iranian attacks, the Iranians laid a minefield that struck an American ship and wounded 10 Sailors. The United States retaliated in Operation PRAYING MANTIS and attacked an Iranian oil platform.”⁶⁵ The military attempted to re-attack and establish dominance but could not. “The Iranians tried to challenge the American Navy surface ships but quickly lost two frigates and four other vessels.”⁶⁶ Iran was likely well aware of the US invasion of Iraq as well, as Russell wrote “The Iranians watched in awe as American and British forces in 2003 dispatched Saddam Hussein’s regime in 3 weeks, a feat that Iran could not achieve in 8 years of war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988.”⁶⁷ However, as powerful as Iran viewed the US, like any other military, Iran also learned what the US military’s vulnerabilities are.

Success with the improvised explosive device (IED) and vehicle borne IED (VBIED) in Iraq and Afghanistan has sparked some innovation in Iran. “Five Iranian Revolutionary Guard patrol boats in January 2008 charged a three-ship U.S. Navy convoy in the Strait of Hormuz, maneuvering around and between a destroyer, cruiser, and frigate during a half-hour challenge. One Iranian boat came within 200 yards of an American ship and almost drew fire.”⁶⁸ This

instance is just one example that attributes to Iran's understanding that effective use of simple and inexpensive weapons employed precisely can cause significant damage. The US has been dealing with these troubles for years and Iran has learned from others' successes and mistakes. Because Iran has seen and analyzed US vulnerabilities of warships close to shore and at port, and the USS *Cole* incident in 2000, Dr. Russell assesses, "Iran's Revolutionary Guard navy and operatives would be keen to replicate such an operational success against American ships anchored or under way in waters around Bahrain, the UAE, Oman, Kuwait, or Saudi Arabia to scare off American port visits and transit operations."⁶⁹

Suicide bombing has also been a tactic utilized and trained by IRGC forces, and it could be used at sea as well as it has been done on land. "The Iranians have proven adept at recruiting and training suicide bombers similar to those that Hezbollah has thrown against American forces in the past."⁷⁰ This is a tactic that US ground forces has grown familiar with in regard to vehicle borne IEDs (VBIEDs), and they have developed ROE to mitigate that threat. "In future Gulf warfare, the Iranians could recruit and train a suicide bomber cadre for explosive laden small craft and jet skis."⁷¹ In regard to Iran testing potential rules of engagement or escalation of force procedures, John Arquilla wrote about a new tactic Iran could employ. He relates a tactic that is similar to how the US uses drones and unmanned aerial vehicles, but applies it to ships in the form of a jet ski full of explosives. He says "Imagine a number of these remote-controlled craft coming at a traditional warship—a destroyer, cruiser, or even an aircraft carrier. The larger the number of drones, the greater the chance some will get through, sinking or seriously damaging expensive naval vessels at little cost, and virtually without risk to one's remote pilots."⁷²

From a more conventional standpoint, and complementing the unconventional ones, the anti-access, area-denial capability of a predominantly land-locked Iran has been expanding

where they are most vulnerable, from the sea. Russia has been selling diesel-electric submarines to Iran to make up for its lack of surface ships to use against US naval forces. “Moscow sold Tehran three *Kilo*-class submarines, which are quiet, small, and ideal for operating in shallow Gulf waters with weapons loads of a mix of 18 homing and wire-guided torpedoes or 24 mines.”⁷³ The look toward the sea did not stop with small purchases from Russia, but extended through various other deals with North Korea. “The Iranians are diversifying their submarine and irregular warfare capabilities and have purchased at least three one-man submarines designed for covert demolition and infiltration operations. They have also obtained midget submarines from North Korea.”⁷⁴ With this new assistance from other countries, Iran has also reportedly been producing its own subs. “Tehran announced in November 2007 that it had launched its second indigenously built *Ghadir*-class submarine, which it claimed could fire missiles and torpedoes simultaneously.”⁷⁵

Iran has other anti-access issues besides the land and sea, and capabilities to complement its resources through the air. “Saturation fire of Iranian cruise missiles, especially in the narrow Strait of Hormuz, is another looming danger. The Iranians have cruise missiles from China and could buy more from Russia.”⁷⁶ This capability could be used synergistically to exploit and/or isolate any vessel that enters Iran’s anti-access area, particularly in the Strait of Hormuz, an area that has been contended by Iranian President Ahmadinejad. “Though facing vastly superior military capabilities, Iran has a number of military options in the Gulf. While it may not be able to carry out its threat to ‘close’ the strait, it could cause significant disruption to shipping – and also invite a hostile response.”⁷⁷ Iran’s knowledge of the strategic implications the strait has on the global economy, Ahmadinejad uses it as a bargaining tool. According to the United States Energy Information Administration, “17 million barrels of oil passed through the strait every day

in 2011, or about 35% of all seaborne traded oil. Iran itself is heavily dependent on oil flowing through the strait: approximately 70% of the government's revenues come from oil exports, all of which currently transit the strait. Iran has no pipelines to its Indian Ocean ports or to countries to its east.”⁷⁸ Iran’s closing of the strait in recent past has resulted in further distancing from the US diplomatic efforts and is obviously counter-productive.

Another strategic impact Iran has militarily could be its potential use of nuclear weapons. Understanding Iran’s missile capabilities, in his presentation to the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Mr. Clapper stated that “We judge Iran would likely choose missile delivery as its preferred method of delivering a nuclear weapon. Iran already has the largest inventory of ballistic missiles in the Middle East, and it is expanding the scale, reach, and sophistication of its ballistic missile forces, many of which are inherently capable of carrying a nuclear payload.”⁷⁹ Whether or not Iran possesses nuclear weapons is classified in nature, but if they were to create and eventually utilize them, LTC Gossett points out in “Iran: Flashpoint in the Middle East” that:

A nuclear Iran would have consequences for the current Arab-Persian divide, which already exists. Tehran would wield its influence as a nuclear superpower resulting in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) seeking a nuclear program to deter Iran and creating a further gap between these two distinct cultures. The result would likely be a significant nuclear arms race in the Middle East that would further deteriorate regional stability. The GCC and Israel continue to question the irrational behavior Tehran exhibits in the region. There are questions and concerns from the international community regarding whether Iran is responsible enough to have such a weapon. There is concern from the world that Tehran has motives other than providing security for their nation-state. Such motives include Iran supplying its proxies with nuclear weapons to eliminate Israel or giving material to terrorist organizations to strike targets around the world.⁸⁰

The military capabilities of Iran are thus not limited to their own employment of nuclear weapons, and the implications of Iran simply possessing one draws concerns that branch out beyond future Unified Action against the Islamic Republic.

A Conceptual Approach to Iran

The United States military has learned multiple lessons from the last decade of war, most of which may apply in a conflict with Iran. First, In Iraq, the Bush administration antagonized the international community, including both the United Nations and European allies, and made it much more difficult to obtain help for the occupation and reconstruction of the country. Second, all phases of the operations were not planned simultaneously, resulting in a lack of troops and subsequent troop surges in both theaters. Third, the reconciliation and utilization of former regime members was not efficient. Non-violent Taliban leaders that could possibly have been reconciled were not retained, and the overall de-Baathification created the space that led to the Sunni insurgency in Iraq. The fourth issue was the lack of capability to transition to enabling civil authorities as soon as possible by identifying possible gaps and friction points before the campaign reached that transition; thus, the lesson that plans for enabling civil authorities and emplacing systems and personnel to handle that after major conflict were critical to success, and insufficient in both theaters. The final lesson learned, and arguably the most important, was the inability of US forces to prevent mission creep. The nation building in both theaters was not the intention during initial planning for both theaters.

The US and its partners will need to address each lesson learned when planning Joint/Unified Action against Iran. The first issue will be the requirement to align with allied nations on a unified front. In order to garner greater support for military action against Iran, US action would need to be justified. Determining between an unjustified act of war or as a simple response to Ahmadinejad's rhetoric must be clarified for the Iranian People. "If Iranian hardliners are seen as the source of the problem, then many – in the United States, Europe, the

Gulf Arab states, and elsewhere – might reluctantly accept preventive action as an unfortunate necessity. This perception could also influence an Iranian decision to rebuild, and how it might respond militarily.”⁸¹ It is also important to consider actions of countries that could support Iran, such as Russia or China. The need or ability to be able to rapidly transition or conduct multiple phases simultaneously at lower levels is mandatory to ensure success in Iran. Coalition forces must exercise simultaneity efficiently in Iran. Some individuals on a case-by-case basis may be able to contribute to later phases in the campaign. It is crucial to avoid mission creep and to plan for identifying indicators and warnings that it is happening during an Iranian conflict. Iran’s complex environment will likely present unforeseen issues, which the US can avoid by limiting the military objectives, learning from the past, applying the lessons learned in the recent conflicts, and applying current doctrine to enable US forces to be successful in Iran.

Understanding the unique challenges Iran presents in military planning, and how military action nests with diplomatic and other instruments of national power, it is clear that detailed military planning is a necessity prior to action against Iran in order to alleviate mistakes that US forces could make again. There are multiple military options available; the primary for most war weary Americans would likely be Airpower. It is fast in the sense that it does not necessitate a long, drawn out land force to occupy and operate, and alleviates risk associated with troops on the ground. Naval strikes are also a possibility, but naval forces will require some type of land force to provide decisive action on land-based targets, particularly specific personnel. Air Force and Navy forces certainly provide capabilities that complement unified action from a joint perspective. Special operations missions and interagency operations, however effective, will likely require support through sustainment and logistical aspects from a multitude of services, as well as security, reconnaissance, and additional strike capabilities. A land only option is out of

the question, as Army forces would rely on heavy air, sea, or both means to transport enough Soldiers and Marines to the objective areas. If military action with Iran escalates to sustained land operations, it must be rapid and decisive, as evidence shows that Iran poses unique operational variables and mission variables.

The military must achieve objectives, or tactical victories that meet strategic goals through Operational Art informed by Operational Design, resulting in a plan for joint operations or unified action. “Unified action is the synchronization, coordination, and/or integration of the activities of governmental and nongovernmental entities with military operations to achieve unity of effort.”⁸² As identified, the unique variables Iran possesses will require a joint approach. “Joint operations exploit the advantages of interdependent Service capabilities through unified action, and joint planning integrates military power with other instruments of national power to achieve a desired military end state.”⁸³ Utilizing the joint force against Iran from a military aspect of national power, coupled with diplomacy and other instruments, will be best suited to achieve the strategic end-state for Iran. Utilizing lessons learned from previous conflicts, particularly avoiding mission creep, is critical with regard to such a unique country.

Conclusion: The Conditions For Success

If the United States takes military action against Iran, then decision makers and military planners must recognize the constraints that Iran’s unique character and circumstances place on military options, pursue limited military operations, avoid mission creep, and learn from the last decade of war in order to set the conditions for success. US forces can draw multiple conclusions regarding future conflict with Iran. First, one must understand why Iran is a probable opponent in the near future. Iran is threatening not only the United States, but its Israeli

allies and NATO partners as well. It is disrupting global trade and expanding its negative influences across the globe, particularly to South America and Africa in an attempt to build an axis of unity against the United States. Iran's IRGC Qods force is conducting terrorist activities inside the United States, and conducting other clandestine operations across throughout the world that are difficult to monitor. In particular, Iran's nuclear ambition threatens the future of the planet on a grand scale. Second, the understanding of Iran's extensive history and military capabilities will facilitate the US forces' deeper understanding of how its systems interconnect, and how they can be targeted simultaneously throughout all phases of joint operations. Simultaneously targeting critical vulnerabilities within each of those aspects are necessary in building the campaign plan for Iran. Lastly, the US has been conducting combat operations in the Global War on Terrorism for the past twelve years, from which valuable lessons learned can be applied in a conflict with the Islamic Republic. It is critical for US forces to not forget those lessons, and apply them to a simultaneous, whole of government and joint approach.

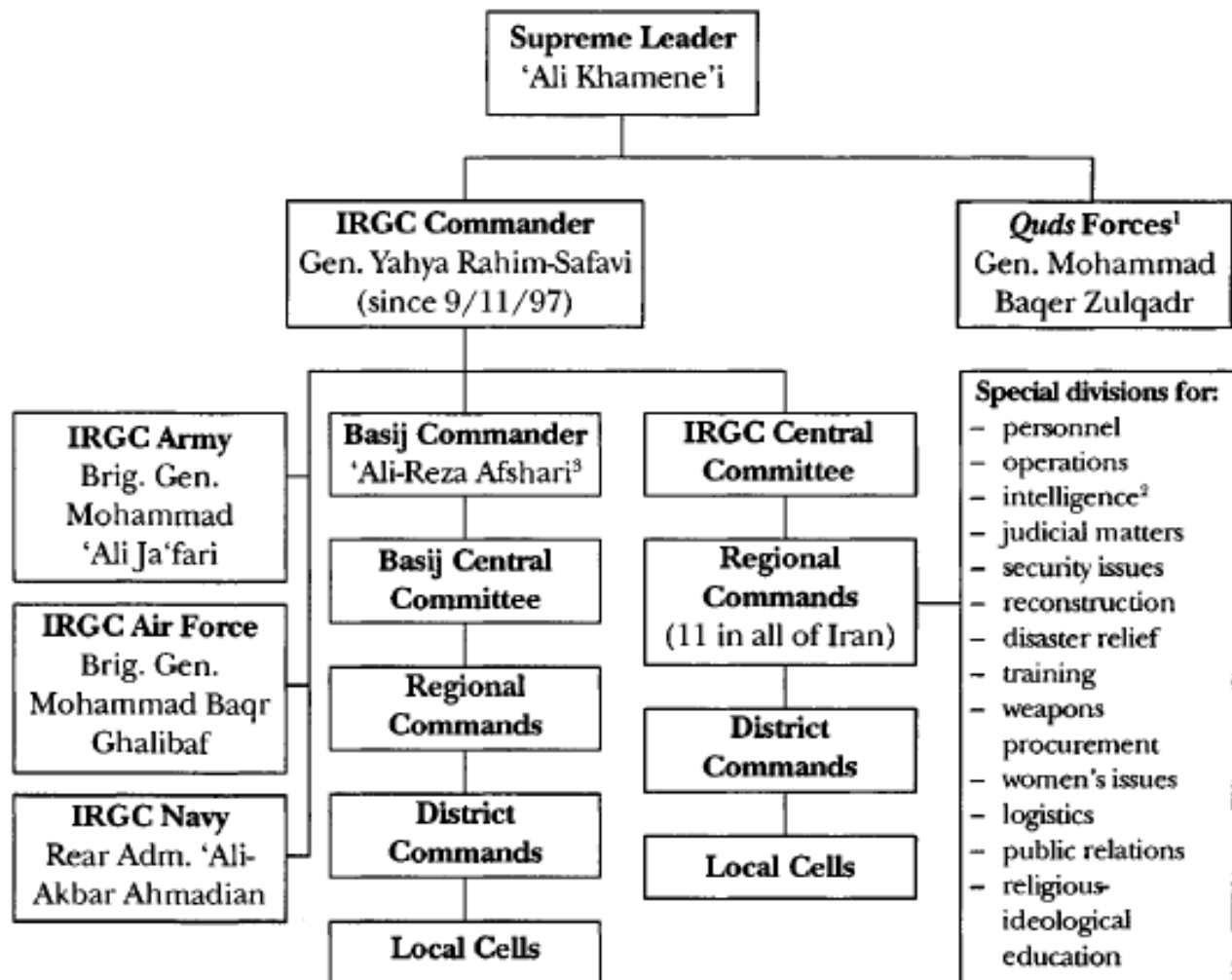


Figure 1: IRGC structure

Source: Buchta, Wilfried. *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy. 2002. 69.

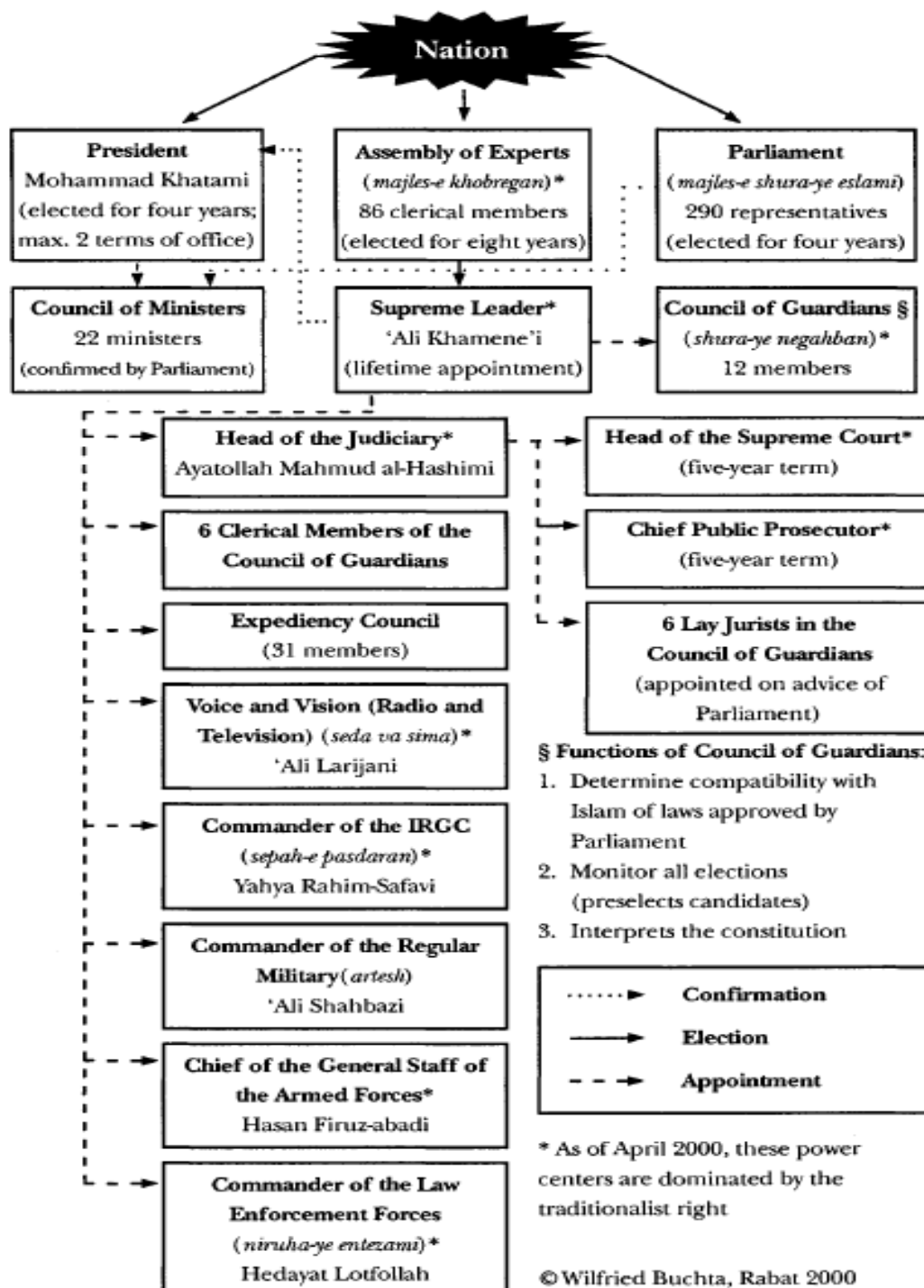


Figure 2: Formal constitutional power structure in Iran (as of 2000)

Source: Buchta, Wilfried. *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy. 2002. 8.

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